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Evolution vs. Creationism: Separation of State and Religion in the Science Classroom

By Linda Lenhard

The U.S. Supreme Court in 1987 stated that creationism is a form of religion and thus was not to be taught in a public school (CBSNEWS.com, 2002; Holden, 2002). Since that ruling at least four court cases have reiterated that public schools are under mandate to teach evolution as the science of the origin of man. However, the continuing debate and legal maneuvering indicate that the fight between those who favor the decision and those who support teaching creationism is far from over (Matsumura, 2002).

Intelligent design, or the teaching that living things are too complex to have occurred through random genetic change and thus must be controlled by an intelligent lifeform, has become the focus of those who resist the evolution theory. While those who support this design do not suggest the nature of that lifeform, they acknowledge there could be a Biblical God, but they are open to other explanations (West, 2002).

In January 2002, President Bush signed the "No Child Left Behind Act." Under this law, assessment of children's scientific knowledge should begin by 2008. A report accompanying the law declares that the curriculum "'should help students to understand the full range of scientific views that exist' on controversial topics, naming biological evolution specifically" (Hoff, 2002, p. 1). Those who support the teaching of intelligent design insist that states should follow the language and spirit of the law. On the other hand, scientists insist that the advisory language has no weight behind it and urge public school teachers to resist teaching anything that is not grounded in the facts of evolution as supported by the scientific community.

In March, the Cobb County Board of Education in Georgia considered a petition with more than 2300 signatures asking that a "clarifying statement" be placed in new science textbooks that would state evolution was only one of several theories regarding the theory of life. Under pressure to satisfy their constituents, the Board decided to draft such a statement. The statement read, "This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered" (National Center for Science Education, March 29, 2002, p. 1). The Board directed that the statement be placed in each new science book.

The statement immediately set the stage for controversy as evolution proponents attacked this action (Concerned Parents of Georgia, 2002). On August 21, a Cobb County parent, Jeff Selwyn, filed suit with the support of the American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia declaring the statement unconstitutional (Holden, 2002; Morahan, 2002)). Mr. Selwyn, who is Jewish, saw the actions of the Board as a poorly disguised attempt to bring Christianity into the classroom.

A firestorm of activity ensued on both sides of the issue. The National Science Teachers Association, The National Academy of Sciences, and biologists at all of Georgia's leading colleges and universities opposed the change and wrote the School Board encouraging them to revise their stand (National Center for Science Education, September 27, 2002; Morahan, 2002). They also asked the State of Georgia to intervene and prevent the curriculum change from taking place.

At the August 2002 Cobb County School Board meeting, the Board members considered changes related to the teaching of evolution (National Center for Science Education, August 24, 2002; Taylor, 2002). The District's policy, in effect since 1995, stated that while the District recognized some theories on the origin of life that were being taught in the schools were inconsistent with those teachings received by the students at home, the Constitutional principal of separation of church and state as established by the U.S. Supreme Court would be maintained. The new policy stated that it was the aim of the District to provide a broad-based curriculum; therefore, the discussion of controversial subjects was necessary in order to provide a balanced approach to education. The policy specifically included the study of the origin of the species as a controversial subject. It further stated that the teaching of this subject should be handled with objectivity and good judgment on the part of teachers as they take into account the age and maturity of their students (Cobb County School District, 2002; NCSE, 2002d).

On September 26 the Board adopted the new policy. However, the Board Chair stated, "We expect teachers to continue to teach the theory of evolution. . . We do not expect teachers to teach creationism. . . Religion has no place in science instruction" (West, 2002, p. 1). The Board denied that creationism would be taught and insisted that its purpose was to bring greater inquiry into the classroom and to allow for open debate of the diversity of opinions. The Board received many letters opposing the decision, but they also received correspondence from 28 scientists who teach at institutions such as Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia stating that they were skeptical of Darwinism and urging the Board to allow a "careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory" (p. 1). Among these 28 scientists was one that had been nominated for the Nobel prize several times. These men and women were backed by more than 130 scientists nationwide. Moeller (2002), an oral surgeon and teacher at a religious school, asserted that the study of life is an area that "continues to be influenced by contributions from many fields of science" (p. F1). He emphasized that truth is better served by keeping an open mind and listening to all sides of the issue.

Dr. David Schwimmer (2002), a professor of paleontology, noted that while it may appear that science would be best served by opening up the classroom to controversial views to stimulate thought and discovery, it flies in the face of all that has been accepted as scientific inquiry. Science evolves from careful study and experimentation. There is no way to experiment with creationism, and, therefore, it is not "provable." Evolution, on the other hand, deals in facts. It takes the evidence and builds a body of theory and beliefs. There are those who take this approach to mean that evolutionists take evidence and form theories from their human understanding of the world. These scientists are unable to explain many of the "facts," but they interpret their meaning from their

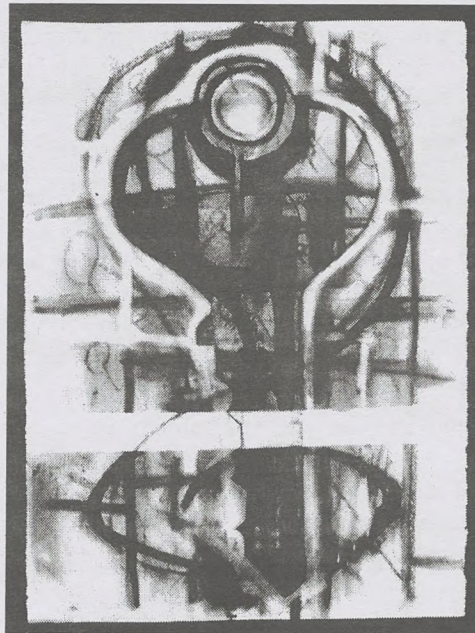
experience and the experience of other experts in the field. Creationists say that these "facts" may not mean what the evolutionists say at all because there is a "spiritual" basis that is not understood or accepted by those involved. The argument goes back and forth, and it will probably never be put to rest.

At the present time, the suit against the Cobb County School Board has not come before the court. If the ACLU wins, it could mean the status quo remains in place and, once again, evolution will be taught exclusively in the classroom. If the new School Board policy is allowed to stand, it may be used as a banner by the creationists to move forward to other school districts in their quest to return God to the classroom. Even though the Cobb County School Board says it was not their intent to create a new round of fighting, it appears they have given new life to the evolution/creation argument in Georgia. Science teachers will be watching the action to see which way it will go as it could have a profound effect on the way science is taught in the state.

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